

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL IN THE WRITINGS OF C. S. LEWIS

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Introduction to the Problem of Evil

On September 11th, 2001, hijackers shattered the lives of thousands of innocents and destroyed the naivete of many Americans who thought that evil was just a matter of popular opinion or a far-removed problem that would soon be eradicated by public policy and a little goodwill. This recent incident brought home lessons that should have been learned from the horror of the Holocaust not many years earlier: evil is potently and undeniably real; it is not a matter of personal taste, but a universally recognized blight on human happiness and well-being; evil is a recurring menace that no amount of civilization, progress, or enlightenment has been able to hold at bay.

In the face of such unmistakable evil it is common, and even understandable, to wonder, “Where was God?” Why didn’t he strike the hijackers dead to prevent them from wreaking havoc on Sept. 11th? How could he seemingly turn a deaf ear to the desperate prayers of millions of Jews for deliverance during the Holocaust? Doesn’t he know the atrocities that take place daily in this world he supposedly created? We may wonder with the Psalmist, “Why, O Lord do you stand far off? Why do you hide yourself in time of trouble?”¹

This is the age-old dilemma of the problem of evil. Evil exists, yet according to Christian theism, a perfectly good (omni-benevolent) and a perfectly powerful

¹ Ps. 110:1 NIV

(omnipotent) God also exists. To add to the problem, God is also all-knowing (omniscient), so he is well aware that evil exists. These propositions seem mutually exclusive. Apologist Dr. Norman Geisler states the classical problem of evil this way:

1. If God is all good, he would destroy evil
2. If God is all powerful, he could destroy evil
3. But evil is not destroyed.
4. Therefore, there is no such God.²

In other words, if God really is good, one would think he would want to destroy evil. If he really is all powerful, one would think he has the ability to destroy evil. However, we still observe evil in our world, which makes it seem that God, in the classical definition, must not exist.

Some have tried to mitigate the problem by claiming that God does care, and he really would like to stop evil, but he is unable to. Rabbi Kushner brought this approach to popular attention in his book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.³ However, this approach abandons one of the classical attributes of God, ie. his omnipotence.

Pantheists try to solve the problem by denying the reality of evil. Atheists deny the existence of God altogether.⁴ However, none of these options are viable for Christian theism.

² Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999) , 221.

³ Kushner, Harold S., *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York, NY: Avon Books, 1981).

⁴ Geisler, *Encyclopedia of Apologetics*, 219.

It is crucial that Christian theists formulate a sound and cogent answer to the problem of evil, because if the problem can't be answered, Christian theism is untenable. In fact, the problem of evil is one of the main objections non-believers have to Christianity. Christian philosophers Peter Kreeft and Ronald K. Nash admit that the problem of evil is “the apparent proof of atheism” and the “only one argument that even claims to prove there is no God.”⁵ For example, Jewish author Elie Wiesel recounts the loss of his faith in God as a result of experiencing the blatant evil of the Holocaust. In his famous autobiographical account *Night*, Wiesel relates the following:

Never shall I forget that night, the first night in camp, which has turned my life into one long night...Never shall I forget the little faces of the children, whose bodies I saw turned into wreaths of smoke beneath a silent blue sky. Never shall I forget those flames which consumed my Faith forever...Never shall I forget those moments which murdered my God and my soul and turned my dreams to dust. Never shall I forget these things, even if I am condemned to live as long as God Himself. Never.⁶

Clearly, it was the problem of evil and the inability to answer it that destroyed Wiesel's faith in the existence of a good and omnipotent God.

Thankfully, however, the problem of evil is answerable in a Christian theistic framework. Renowned author and atheist-turned-apologist C. S. Lewis is one of the Christian thinkers who has taken the problem of evil head-on and has formulated a cohesive and convincing answer. C. S. Lewis develops this answer in a number of his works, most notably: *The Problem of Pain*, *The Great Divorce*, and *Mere Christianity*.

⁵ Kreeft, Peter and Tacelli, Ronald T., *Handbook of Christian Apologetics* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press) , 122.

⁶ Wiesel, Elie, *Night* (New York, NY: Bantam Books) , 32.

Answering the Problem of Evil

The Free Will Defense

The primary answer to the problem of evil is the free will defense. C. S. Lewis convincingly and cleverly explains how the doctrine of free will can help mitigate the problem of evil. He points out that the evil we see in the world is not God's primary will, but came about because humans and angels have abused their God-given gift of free will. In other words, God did not create evil, but making creatures with free will necessarily includes the possibility of evil. However, God did not will for evil to be actualized, nor does the existence of actual evil deny his omnipotence. In his book *Mere Christianity* Lewis uses the following illustration to explain this seeming contradiction:

Anyone who has been in authority knows how a thing can be in accordance with your will in one way and not in another. It might be quite sensible for a mother to say to the children, "I'm not going to go and make you tidy the school-room every night. You've got to learn to keep it tidy on your own" Then she goes up one night and finds the Teddy bear and the ink and the French Grammar all lying in the grate. That is against her will. She would prefer the children to be tidy. But on the other hand, it is her will which has left the children free to be untidy... You make a thing voluntary and then half the people do not do it. That is not what you willed, but your will has made it possible.⁷

In the same way, even though it is against God's will for evil to exist, his act of creating beings with free wills of their own makes evil possible. His ultimate will has not been thwarted by the existence of evil because he willed to give us free wills, and in doing so created the possibility that we might choose to disobey him. However, C. S. Lewis emphasizes that there is an important distinction between the *possibility* and *necessity* of

⁷ Lewis, C. S., *Mere Christianity* (New York, NY: The Macmillan Company, 1943; reprinted 1971), 52. (all page numbers from the reprinted edition)

evil. He argues that it is possible to have a world of created beings with free will who do not actualize evil; this was even possible for our world before the fall of angels and men. In *The Problem of Pain* Lewis states, “If there are other intelligent beings on other planets, it is not necessary to suppose that they have fallen like us.”⁸ (Lewis is not arguing here that there are other worlds - he argues elsewhere that ours is the only possible world - but that it is possible to have free beings who do not fall.) Therefore, Lewis concludes that God is not culpable for the creation or existence of evil.

C. S. Lewis anticipates that some might claim God could have created free beings which would not choose evil. In *Mere Christianity* he argues, “Some people think they can imagine a creature which was free but had no possibility of going wrong; I cannot. If a thing is free to be good it is also free to be bad. And free will is what has made evil possible.”⁹ The next logical question one might ask is that if God cannot create a being with free will who would not choose evil, does this mean that his power is limited? Isn’t God by definition supposed to be able to do anything? Lewis answers this question in *The Problem of Pain*:

His (God’s) omnipotence means power to do all that is intrinsically possible, not to do the intrinsically impossible. You may attribute miracles to him, but not nonsense. There is no limit to his power. If you choose to say “God can give a creature free will and at the same time withhold free will from it,” you have not succeeded in saying anything about God: meaningless combinations of words do not suddenly acquire meaning simply because we prefix to them the two other words

⁸ Lewis, C. S., *The Problem of Pain*, (New York: Macmillian, 1962; reprinted by Touchstone 1996) , 75. (all page numbers from the reprinted edition)

⁹ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 52.

“God can.”...nonsense remains nonsense even when we talk it about God.¹⁰

In other words, Lewis is saying that God’s power pertains to everything that is “intrinsically” or logically possible for him to do. The very laws of logic or “intrinsic” possibility flow from God’s nature, and he can’t contradict his own nature. As philosopher Thomas V. Morris says in *Our Idea of God*: “anything that is logically possible for a perfect being to do, God can do.”¹¹ God cannot create triangles with four sides or married bachelors because both would be complete nonsense. Likewise, it is logically or “intrinsically” impossible to create a being which is free and yet not free at the same time. God cannot and will not create nonsense.

Even though God is not the author of evil, one might wonder why he would create beings and give them free will if doing so was so risky. In *The Great Divorce*, C. S. Lewis’ mentor George Macdonald makes a fictional appearance in which he tells the narrator (presumably Lewis) that freedom is “the gift whereby ye most resemble your Maker and are yourselves parts of eternal reality.”¹² The gift of freedom itself bestows honor and worth to the creature and thus seems to be an intrinsic good. Lewis also sheds some light on the question in *Mere Christianity*:

Free will, though it makes evil possible, is also the only thing that makes possible any love or goodness or joy worth having. A world of automata – of creatures that worked like machines – would hardly be worth creating. The happiness which God designs for His higher creatures is the

¹⁰ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 25.

¹¹ Morris, Thomas V., *Our Idea of God*, (Downer’s Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1991) , 68.

¹² Lewis, C. S., *The Great Divorce* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1946: reprinted by Touchstone, 1996) , 122. (all page numbers from the reprinted edition)

happiness of being freely, voluntarily united to Him and to each other in an ecstasy of love and delight compared with which the most rapturous love between a man and a woman on this earth is mere milk and water. And for that they must be free.¹³

Lewis is saying that God's ultimate reason for creating free creatures is that we might love him and be loved by him. True love involves a choice between two free creatures such as a man and a woman or a father and a son. One cannot truly love or be loved by a robot or "automaton" as Lewis calls it. If God forced his free creatures to love him, he would be denying both their free will and their love. In God's perfect wisdom, he knew that only a free choice would bind his creatures to him in a true love relationship. No one loves a tyrant who demands "love"; indeed, such could not even be properly called "love." Such a set up would be more like a forced marriage; and only rebellion, not true love, can flow from such an arrangement. So even though a free creature may choose evil, the possibility of choosing love and all the joy it entails seems to outweigh the risk.

As Lewis puts it a few paragraphs later in *Mere Christianity*:

If God thinks this state of war in the universe a price worth paying for free will – that is, for making a live world in which creatures can do real good or harm and something of real importance can happen, instead of a toy world which only moves when He pulls the strings – then we may take it it is worth paying.¹⁴

Even though we may not think that a real world, involving love and free will, not a "toy world" in which God only "pulls the strings," is worth the risk, God apparently does.

Although we may not understand all of the reasons why this is so, it at least seems

¹³ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 52.

¹⁴ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 53.

possible that God, who sees the big picture, has a reason far beyond our human comprehension. Lewis adds that it is really impossible to disagree with God because “He is the source from whence all your reasoning power comes...When you are arguing against Him you are arguing against the very power that makes you able to argue at all.”¹⁵ This statement does not mean that we shouldn’t think or argue for the truth at all because God himself is the author of logic and truth. However, the implication is that we may reach a point at which the truth is beyond our human comprehension, but this doesn’t mean that it is illogical. Such may be the case with the question of whether God should have created free creatures or not.

Thus, while it is difficult this side of eternity to definitely prove that free will is worth the risk, the arguments make it seem at least reasonably possible for this assertion to be true. In other words, it is possible for evil to exist because of the greater good of free will. This possibility means that the existence of evil cannot conclusively rule out the existence of God.

To make the case even stronger it is necessary to discuss the matter of possible worlds. At the outset our world may not seem to be the best possible world. However, Lewis argues that ours is indeed the only possible world in *The Problem of Pain*:

“Perhaps this is not the ‘best of all possible’ universes, but the only possible one. Possible worlds can mean only ‘worlds that God could have made, but didn’t’. The idea of that which God ‘could have done’ involves a too anthropomorphic conception of God’s freedom...Divine freedom cannot mean indeterminacy between alternatives and a choice of one of them. Perfect goodness can never debate about the end to be attained, and perfect wisdom cannot debate about the means most suited

¹⁵ Ibid., 52-53.

to achieve it.¹⁶

What Lewis is saying here is that God, in his perfect wisdom, goodness, and power, chose to create what he knew would be the best possible world. He did not have to choose between possible worlds or weigh possibilities because in his omniscience he knew the best world and willed to create it. The fact that we may disagree with him is due to an imperfection of knowledge on our part. It is important to state here that the “possible worlds argument” does not necessarily prove that a God exists who is perfect in wisdom, goodness, and power, but that the existence of evil may be compatible with the God of Christian theism who is so defined.

To take a step towards illuminating God’s wisdom in creating our world the way it is, it may be possible that our world, while not conforming perfectly to God’s primary will, may be the only possible way to get to the absolutely best possible world – heaven. As will be discussed in more detail later, heaven is a place in which all creatures have freely chosen to love God and thus are perfectly surrendered to His will. Humans will have made this decision while earth and by grace through faith and will be able to fully live this out in heaven. In such a place there will be absolutely no evil because God’s will of perfect love is always obeyed - voluntarily. There will be no more tears, no more pain, only perfect joy in God’s presence. As Revelation 7:17 promises, “God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.” Surely this is what we mean by “the best possible world.”

¹⁶ Ibid., 31-32.

It seems necessary to cover one more idea on the topic of free will. Even though God isn't culpable for the emergence or existence of evil in our world, why doesn't he intervene to stop our present abuse of free will, or at least curb the effects of evil? C. S. Lewis explains in *The Problem of Pain*:

We can, perhaps, conceive of a world in which God corrected the results of this abuse of free will by His creatures at every moment...But such a world would be one in which wrong actions were impossible, and in which, therefore, freedom of the will would be void.¹⁷

Lewis' answer is that if God always intervened to stop us from making wrong choices, he would be violating or denying the very free will that he created us to have. In other words, God is respecting the right he gave us to be free moral agents. And if our evil choices had no evil effects, would we really be acting at all? We would be back to a "toy world" as Lewis put it. Lewis qualifies that God does have the power to intervene, and does so at specific times for miracles, but a miracle by its very definition is an exception to the rule. Again in *The Problem of Pain*, Lewis states:

That God can and does, on occasions, modify the behaviour of matter and produce what we call miracles, is part of the Christian faith; but the very conception of a stable world demands that these occasions should be extremely rare.¹⁸

Constant miracles would again be violating the principle of free will. It should be added that most (if not all) miracles only suspend the laws of nature, not human will. God's working on the human will is persuasive, not coercive, and God's decision to suspend laws of nature has quite different implications since no other free moral agent is involved. And again, for there to be stable laws of nature, miracles must be rare.

¹⁷ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 30.

Lewis brings all of these ideas together later in *The Problem of Pain* in a section on the original sin of Adam:

It would...have been possible for God to remove by miracle the results of the first sin committed by a human being; but this would not have been much good unless He was prepared to remove the results of the second sin, and of the third, and so on forever. If the miracles ceased, then sooner or later we might have reached our present lamentable situation: if they did not, then a world, thus continually under-propped and corrected by Divine interference, would have been a world in which nothing important ever depended on human choice...¹⁹

It all comes back to the point that our “present lamentable situation” has come about because of God’s respect for our free will, which in his perfect wisdom he knows to be ultimately good. The miracles that do happen remind us that, though God has created us free, he has not left us completely to our own devices. He is still sovereign, and has not just created the world and walked away.

God’s Omnipotence and the Soul-making Theodicy

In Jean-Paul Sartre’s fictional play *The Flies*, the character of Zeus says to King Aegistheus that the “bane of gods and kings” is the “bitterness of knowing that men are free.”²⁰ Presumably, Zeus means that the free will of man means they are beyond the ultimate control of gods and kings, thus leading to “bitterness” on the parts of all rulers who long for complete power. Thankfully, this same paradigm does not extend to the God of Christian theism who is by nature infinite and omnipotent, in contrast to the finite

¹⁸ Ibid., 30.

¹⁹ Ibid., 63.

²⁰ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *The Flies*, from the book of plays *No Exit* (New York: Vintage International Books, 1989), 100.

gods of polytheism and to even more limited earthly rulers. The doctrine of God's divine sovereignty coupled with the existence of free will is not only ultimately reassuring, but leads to the next attempt to answer the problem of evil, namely, the "soul-making theodicy."

The "soul-making theodicy" asserts that because of God's ultimate power, he can turn evil around and use it for the good of growing or "making" the souls of humans on earth. For example, the Old Testament figure of Joseph is cruelly sold into slavery by his jealous brothers; yet because of this, he ends up becoming second in command to the Pharaoh of Egypt and saves his family and many others from starvation. Joseph realizes that what his brothers meant for evil, God had used for good.²¹ This experience greatly grew Joseph's character and soul and gave him a personal experience of God's ultimate goodness. A modern-day example of soul-making is Corrie ten Boom, a Dutch Christian who helped smuggle Jews out of Nazi controlled territory and, as a result, suffered the horror of Nazi concentration camps herself. She survived the ordeal, and through her suffering she learned that "there is no pit so deep his [God's] love is not deeper still."²² Although her faith was sorely tried, her soul and relationship with God were grown as she learned that God's love never fails, even in face of the most desperate evil.

²¹ Genesis, chapters 37-47.

²² *The Hiding Place*, prod. Frank R. Jacobson; dir. James F. Collier, 145 min., World Wide Pictures, 1975, videocassette.

Lewis refers to the idea of soul-making explicitly in a number of his books. He even refers to our world as a “vale of soul-making.”²³ In *The Problem of Pain* he explains that God is not a “senile benevolence” who “likes to see young people enjoying themselves” in a shallow sense.²⁴ God’s ultimate goal for us is to be “good,” not merely “happy,” so he uses evil as the instrument with which to make us good.²⁵ Allowing some pain and suffering into our lives is actually a greater “kindness” than we may think. He explains this principle in *The Problem of Pain*:

Kindness, merely as such, cares not whether its object becomes good or bad, provided only that it escapes suffering. As Scripture points out, it is illegitimate sons who are spoiled; the legitimate sons...are punished. It is for people whom we care nothing about that we demand happiness on any terms: with our friends, our lovers, our children, we are exacting and would rather see them suffer much than be happy in contemptible and estranging modes. If God is Love, He is, by definition, something more than mere kindness.²⁶

In other words, God’s love for us goes beyond mere “kindness”. It would not be loving of him to leave us “happy in contemptible or estranging modes” because such would be a false happiness, and ultimately detrimental to us. Even earthly fathers prove their love for their legitimate sons by disciplining them and training them to choose good instead of evil. Thus, suffering allowed for pruning and growth is actually proof that God loves us.

²³ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 97.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, chapter 3.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 36.

In his perfect wisdom, God knows that our greatest good is to love him and be loved by him. As Lewis puts it, “God wills our good, and our good is to love Him.”²⁷

Lewis states eloquently that God is “the consuming fire Himself, the Love that made the worlds,”²⁸ and that God’s ultimate desire is to share himself and his love with his creatures. Lewis expounds this idea in *The Problem of Pain*:

We were made not primarily that we may love God (though we were made for that too) but that God may love us, that we may become objects in which the Divine love may rest “well pleased.” To ask that God’s love should be content with us is to ask that God should cease to be God: because He is what He is, His love must...be impeded and repelled by certain stains in our present character, and because He already loves us He must labour to make us lovable.²⁹

God’s perfect goodness makes it impossible for him to be near to us because we ourselves are full of evil and sin. It is because he loves us so much that he attempts to purge us from our evil, to make us “lovable.” When he has finally purged us from the evil that separates us from him, “when we are such as He can love without impediment, we shall in fact be happy.”³⁰ It is our ultimate good and true happiness, as well as his glory, for which God is concerned. Lewis concludes, “We are embarrassed by too much love...not too little.”³¹

²⁷ Ibid., 47.

²⁸ Ibid., 42.

²⁹ Ibid., 43.

³⁰ Ibid., 47.

³¹ Ibid., 48.

To put it a different way, Lewis says that the ultimate good of each “creature” is to “surrender itself to its Creator”³² for this is what it (we) were created to do. When we do this we are “good and happy.”³³ Lewis sums this up eloquently by saying “We are not merely imperfect creatures who must be improved: we are as Newman said, rebels who must lay down our arms.”³⁴ Starting with Adam and Eve and continuing down through history to every individual, humans have turned away from God to self. Lewis defines sin as “putting yourself first – wanting to be the center – wanting to be God, in fact. That was the sin of Satan: and that was the sin he taught the human race.”³⁵ Our ultimate good is to turn from self back to God – to honor him as the one God. God has made this return possible by paying the penalty of our sin through Christ’s death on the cross. But as C. S. Lewis points out, “to render back the will which we have so long claimed for our own is in itself a grievous pain.”³⁶ Without God’s grace in many forms it would be too difficult to turn back to him even if the way was open; it is not easy to give up being the gods of our own lives. Lewis shares this insight: “The human spirit will not even begin to try to surrender self-will as long as all seems to be well with it,” but “pain is unmasked, unmistakable evil; every man knows that something is wrong when he is

³² Ibid., 80.

³³ Ibid., 80.

³⁴ Ibid., 81.

³⁵ Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 53

³⁶ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 81.

being hurt.”³⁷ God must sometimes use pain to get our attention, to show us that all is not well as we thought.

Lewis gives a compelling explanation of this use of pain: “God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”³⁸ We are “deaf” to our need to turn back to God, and one means of God’s grace is to wake us up to this truth through the “megaphone” of pain. The design of the “megaphone” of pain is to rouse a sinner to repentance and faith in Christ’s atoning work on the cross. Again, Lewis explains that

until the evil man finds evil unmistakably present in his existence, in the form of pain, he is enclosed in illusion. Once pain has roused him...he either rebels (with the possibility of a clearer issue and deeper repentance at some later stage) or else makes some attempt at an adjustment, which, if pursued, will lead him to religion.

God shows his love for us by shattering the illusions that keep us from the truth. When a person realizes that something is wrong and attempts to find a solution, the search, if pursued wholeheartedly, will lead to Christ and the opportunity for redemption. As God says in the book of Jeremiah, “You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.”³⁹

However, as Lewis’ quotation above also alleges, the “megaphone” of pain may cause a person to rebel against the truth and against God. Lewis puts it this way:

No doubt Pain as God’s megaphone is a terrible instrument; it may lead to final and unrepented

³⁷ Ibid., 82.

³⁸ Ibid., 83.

³⁹ Jer. 29: 13 NIV.

rebellion. But it gives the only opportunity the bad man can have for amendment. It removes the veil; it plants the flag of truth within the fortress of a rebel soul.⁴⁰

Pain may be the only wake-up-call a “rebel soul” is capable of hearing. Given the seriousness of the issue, such pain seems worth the risk.

On the other hand, pain may be a means of grace to the so-called “good person” as well. Lewis urges with what he hopes to be “sufficient tenderness” that

God, who made these deserving people, may really be right when He thinks that their modest prosperity and the happiness of their children are not enough to make them blessed: that all this must fall from them in the end, and that if they have not learned to know Him they will be wretched. And therefore He troubles them, warning them in advance of an insufficiency that one day they will have to discover.⁴¹

Even the “good people” are not wholly good. They may not cheat on their taxes or murder anyone, but there is still within every human soul, however well disguised, the desire to elevate self to the place of highest reverence. The relationship with God has still been broken and needs to be put right, even in the seeming saint. God’s revelation of the truth in the Bible states, “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus.”⁴²

God must shatter the illusions even of the “good people” for their ultimate good.

In chapter nine of Lewis’ fictional allegory of heaven and hell, *The Great Divorce*, the author creates an imaginative picture of what the process and end result of soul-making looks like from a heavenly perspective. A “ghost” who has come from hell

⁴⁰ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 85.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁴² Rom.3:23-24 NIV.

or “purgatory” to visit the fringes of heaven is prevented from going further into heaven by a “lizard” clutching painfully onto his shoulder. This “lizard” is symbolic of the lust he hangs onto, but could also symbolize the sinful enthronement of self. An angel offers to kill the lizard and free the ghost. The angel assures the ghost that to do so might “hurt” the ghost, but not “kill” him. The angel also says “I cannot kill it against your will. It is impossible,”⁴³ thereby affirming free will and the necessity of cooperation in the process. At first the ghost resists, but finally he gives up the struggle and cries out “God help me.”⁴⁴ This cry for mercy is all that is needed. The angel twists the neck of the lizard and “kills” it. What comes next is astonishing. The shadowy figure of the ghost begins to grow “every moment solid” until it is transformed into an “immense” and golden-headed man who is now one of the “solid people.”⁴⁵ The lizard itself is transformed into a great, shining “stallion,” and man and horse gallop off happily into deep heaven. To unpack the allegory, when the ghost cries for mercy and lets God free him from himself, or from his sinful desires, he is transformed into one of the redeemed and all of heaven is opened to him. Even his desires or his view of self are redeemed and become what God designed them to be. This ghost’s soul is saved and re-made, but the process involved his own pain and ultimately the mercy purchased by Christ’s suffering

⁴³ Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 99.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

on the cross. Soul-making may involve pain and suffering, but ultimately can lead to salvation.

Lewis thus presents a compelling case for God's use of pain, or "unmasked evil," for the ultimate good of all humanity – to literally "make souls." He uses pain to wake us up to our need for God and thereby save our souls. And, as discussed earlier, God also uses pain in a pruning sense to develop our character and enable us to love him more – to help us become more like God and find true happiness in him. Both of these methods suggest that God may have good reasons for permitting suffering, at least for a time, on this earth. In fact, experiencing the evil in this world gives us a very important "hands on lesson" that God's ways are always good, and that rebelling against him brings about disastrous consequences. We can see in a very real way that loving God and obeying him is our greatest good. We can see that we aren't good "gods" of our own personal universes, and that God is the only one who can rule us all in perfect love. Thus, the premise of the problem of evil which states that a good God cannot exist in the face of evil does not seem tenable. This is not to say that God condones evil. The next section will attempt to show that God hates evil and will destroy it at the proper time.

Redemption, Heaven, and Hell as Ultimate Answers to the Problem of Evil

The problem of evil hinges on the assertion that God has not destroyed evil; therefore, he must not care, or cannot destroy evil, or does not exist at all. The arguments so far have established that God may allow evil, at least for a time, out of respect for the

workings of our free will and in order to grow our souls. But will God allow evil to continue forever? If so, how can he be ultimately good or omnipotent? The key Christian answer to the problem of evil is that God hasn't destroyed evil *yet*. God *will* ultimately destroy evil, thus proving that he exists and that he is perfectly good and all-powerful.

God began the process of destroying evil by sending Jesus to die on the cross and rise again. Through the cross God made a way to punish and destroy evil (in the form of human sin), yet save the human creatures whom he dearly loves. Those who repent and believe in Jesus are justified, or saved from the ultimate destiny of all beings who embrace evil: total and final separation from God. Through the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, God also works to remove the evil present in fallen human nature (also known as sanctification). In both justification and sanctification, God works in accordance with the will of the person, so free will is not violated, yet evil is destroyed.⁴⁶ The process of salvation and the destruction of evil will be finished at the end of the world when God comes to "judge the living and the dead," as the Nicene creed affirms, and separate good and evil forever. At present, we are in a time of grace in which all people are given the chance to repent and believe and, in more sense than one, have evil removed from them.

⁴⁶ Geisler, *Chosen but Free*, (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House Publishers, 1999), chapter 3.

However, when the period of grace is ended, God will finally unleash his righteous wrath towards evil and destroy it. This necessitates a total separation of all who embrace evil (humans and fallen angels) from God and from good, ie. heaven and hell. It should be noted that evil does not exist as an entity itself. Evil is a privation of good; it is created when a creature chooses to disobey God, thus creating an absence of goodness. Evil and its consequences can only be separated from good by removing the creatures who will the evil.

Those who shudder at the idea of a loving God sending any of his creatures to hell make the mistake of thinking that “the final loss of one soul gives the lie to all the joy of those who are saved.”⁴⁷ This posture may seem compassionate and merciful, but in C. S. Lewis’ book *The Great Divorce*, the wise character of George Macdonald reveals that what “lurks” behind this is

the demand of the loveless and the self-imprisoned that they should be allowed to blackmail the universe: that till they consent to be happy (on their own terms) no one else shall taste joy; that theirs should be the final power; that Hell should be able to veto Heaven... Either the day must come when joy prevails and all the makers of misery are no longer able to infect it: or else for ever and ever the makers of misery can destroy in others the happiness they reject for themselves. I know it has a grand sound to say ye’ll accept no salvation which leaves even one creature in the dark outside. But watch that sophistry or ye’ll make a Dog in a Manger the tyrant of the universe.⁴⁸

Although C. S. Lewis admits that “there is no doctrine which [he] would more willingly remove from Christianity” than the doctrine of hell, he recognizes that it has the “full

⁴⁷ Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 118.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

support of Scripture” and has the “support of reason.”⁴⁹ If there is no final separation between good and evil, the “misery makers” (or those who embrace evil) would be forever able to keep those who embrace God and good from “tasting joy.” The evil we see in this world would be allowed to continue, and heaven would be kept from fulfilling its ultimate purpose. Hell would be able to “veto” or cancel out the joy of heaven forever. If God did not eventually stop evil from “infecting” good, he would be neither loving nor good.

Those who cry out to God to punish the terrorists of Sept. 11th or the perpetrators of the Holocaust are sensing this deep truth that perfect love must punish evil. We cannot have a God who both punishes and at the same time unconditionally pardons a Hitler. And lest this seem too extreme an example, even the smallest germ of self-centeredness and disobedience to God would be enough to infect heaven. God longs to remove the germ of evil from us, but he cannot if we reject his help. God could save and make a Mother Teresa out of a Hitler by his grace, but not against Hitler’s will. As C. S. Lewis writes in *The Problem of Pain*: “If the happiness of a creature lies in self-surrender, no one can make that surrender but himself (though many can help him to make it) and he may refuse...how can the supreme voluntary act of self-surrender be involuntary?”⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 105.

⁵⁰ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 106.

Another quotation from *The Great Divorce* emphasizes God's ultimate fairness in the doctrine of heaven and hell. Again, the character of George Macdonald states:

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." All that are in Hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no Hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it is opened.⁵¹

As stated previously, heaven is a place of perfect surrender to God's love and God's will. To use Lewis' words, those in heaven have made the free choice to say to God, "Thy will be done." Humans will have made this choice while on earth by grace through faith. In other words, heaven is a place in which the hierarchy of love is made complete: God, as the sovereign, perfectly loves his creatures and wills their best, and in turn his creatures respond in joyful surrender and love for God and each other. In heaven no one "sins" by replacing God with the self because each soul recognizes that God, as perfect Love Himself, is the only one worthy of worship, the only one who completes the hierarchy and makes it beautiful. Lewis describes this hierarchy as a dance in which "the great master Himself leads the revelry, giving Himself eternally to His creatures" as his creatures respond in "continual self-abandonment," constantly surrendering themselves back to God.⁵²

Sadly, however, the reverse is also true. To those who are unrepentant, after numerous warnings and offerings of grace, God will finally say, "Thy will be done." These people have chosen to assert self over God and have chosen not to love him. They

⁵¹ Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 72.

⁵² Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 136-137.

will not surrender to the hierarchy of love; they would rather retain control over their own souls even if it means eternal misery. As Lewis quotes Milton, these miserable souls think it “better to reign in Hell than serve in Heaven.”⁵³ Indeed, Lewis suggests that the damned, though miserable in hell, would not even want to be in heaven because their corrupted natures would rebel against it. As Lewis puts it, “the doors of hell are locked on the *inside*.”⁵⁴ And in Lewis’ fictional allegory, damned ghosts visiting the fringes of heaven find that “reality is harsh to the feet of shadows.”⁵⁵ The “solid” reality of heaven makes their shadowy souls “darned uncomfortable”; even the grass is harsh on their feet.⁵⁶ Their corrupted condition makes heaven a torment, not a joy. In the end, God will respect the rights of his creatures to determine their own destinies, and he “will not, at the cunning tears of Hell, impose on good the tyranny of evil.”⁵⁷

To those who continue to struggle with the doctrine of hell Lewis offers a final answer in the form of a question:

What are you asking God to do? To wipe out their past sins and, at all costs, to give them a fresh start, smoothing every difficulty and offering every miraculous help? But He has done so, on Calvary. To forgive them? They will not be forgiven. To leave them alone? Alas, I am afraid that is what He does.⁵⁸

⁵³ Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 69.

⁵⁴ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 114.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 32, 55.

⁵⁷ Lewis, *The Great Divorce*, 119.

⁵⁸ Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, 114.

God has done everything possible to redeem all of humanity. The cross offers pardon and forgiveness, but as Lewis explains elsewhere, “forgiveness needs to be accepted as well as offered if it is to be complete... a man who admits no guilt can accept no forgiveness.”⁵⁹ God cannot forgive and redeem a man against his will. So in the end God honors the request of those who refuse to be redeemed and leaves them alone forever – which is the definition of hell.

Lewis also gives a final answer to the redeemed who had to experience evil on this earth. Again, the wise guide George Macdonald says to the narrator of *The Great Divorce*:

both good and evil, when they are full grown, become retrospective. Not only this valley but all this earthly past will have been Heaven to those who are saved... The good man’s past begins to change so that his forgiven sins and remembered sorrows take on the quality of Heaven... the Blessed will say [truly] “We have never lived anywhere except in Heaven.”⁶⁰

Through God’s redeeming grace, forgiven earthly sins and temporal hardships will be seen by the saints in heaven as examples of evil turned to good, experiences that deepened their awareness of God’s mercy, grace, and transforming power. To the redeemed it will seem as though they have always lived in “the best possible world.”

Conclusion

In conclusion, the arguments from free will, God’s sovereignty and soul-making, and the doctrines of redemption, heaven, and hell provide an adequate answer to the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 109.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 67-68.

problem of evil. The existence of evil is not fatal to the proposition that the perfectly good and omnipotent God of Christian theism exists. Free will, not God, provides the means, though not the necessity, for the existence of evil. In order to not violate the free will he has given us, God allows evil for a time but can even use evil for the good of soul-making and to accomplish his ultimate designs. And although God hasn't destroyed evil *yet*, he promises to do so when the time of his grace to humanity has passed. God will enact the "great divorce" by separating good from evil forever in heaven and hell in accordance with the free choices of his creatures. In short, by destroying evil, God will forever prove his perfect goodness and omnipotence.

Indeed, the problem of pain seems almost an indirect proof for the existence of God. As Lewis says, it hardly seems logical to deduce a good God from an evil universe at all, but the idea exists and must be accounted for. Lewis puts it this way in *The Problem of Pain*: "If the universe is so bad, or even half so bad, how on earth did human beings ever come to attribute it to the activity of a wise and good Creator?"⁶¹ It would make much more sense to attribute the universe to a dualistic god who is both good and evil, or to the polytheistic idea of many good and evil gods. But Christianity claims that God is completely good. Lewis concludes that such an unexpected idea must come from revelation, not human reason. In addition to this, the very fact that we judge things (and even God) to be evil implies that there must be some standard outside of ourselves by

⁶¹ Lewis, *Problem of Pain*, 13.

which we are judging. Lewis explains how he came to this conclusion in *Mere*

Christianity:

My argument against God was that the universe seemed so cruel and unjust. But how had I got this idea of *just* and *unjust*? A man does not call a line crooked unless he has some idea of a straight line. What was I comparing this universe with when I called it unjust?...Of course I could have given up my idea of justice by saying it was nothing but a private idea of my own. But if I did that, then my argument against God collapsed too – for the argument depended on saying that the world was really unjust, not simply that it did not happen to please my private fancies. Thus in the very act of trying to prove that God did not exist – in other words that the whole of reality was senseless – I found I was forced to assume that one part of reality – namely my idea of justice – was full of sense.⁶²

If evil is just based on our personal likes or dislikes, we have no ultimate case against God. The very act of calling God “unjust” depends on the idea that there is a standard of absolute justice that transcends personal human opinion. But for such an absolute standard of justice or injustice, good or evil, to exist, there must be a God (ie. the ultimate good) from which we derive the standard. Thus, instead of a complete disproof of God, the existence of evil actually seems to provide indirect proof for the existence of the Christian God. The so-called “problem of evil” turns out not to be a problem for Christian theism at all. In fact, the existence of evil turns out to be a problem for atheists who must explain how we have come up with an ultimate standard of evil, and how we have come to have the notion of a good God in the face of evil. The tables have truly turned.

⁶² Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, 45-46.

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